



**Manchester  
Metropolitan  
University**

---

Tebbutt, M and Bourne, D (2014) Shebeens and black music culture in Moss Side, Manchester, in the 1950s and 1960s. *Manchester Region History Review*, 25. pp. 21-34. ISSN 0952-4320

---

**Downloaded from:** <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/621819/>

**Publisher:** Carnegie Publishing

Please cite the published version

<https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk>

# Shebeens and black music culture in Moss Side, Manchester, in the 1950s and 1960s



Dennis  
Bourne and  
Melanie  
Tebbutt

Unlicensed shebeens played an important part in the evolving social and music scene among Caribbean and African migrants to Manchester in the 1950s and 1960s, but their development and significance has received relatively little academic attention. Dave Haslam's *Manchester, England* contains a chapter which alludes to the influence that Moss Side had on the Manchester music scene between the 1940s and the 1990s. CP Lee's *Shake, Rattle and Rain* also makes specific reference to how the black music scene based around the Moss Side area influenced white teenagers in the city. More recently, Commonword Writers' Development Agency, a writing development organisation based in Manchester, has pioneered a project on the black music scene in Manchester between the 1950s and 1990s, by collecting oral testimony about the shebeens and clubs of Moss Side and Hulme across this period. Interviews compiled as part of the Commonword project have proved an invaluable source for what follows, which is intended to introduce the reader to the post-war development of black leisure networks in Manchester, and their relevance to the evolution of Manchester's broader entertainment scene.<sup>1</sup>

Before considering the context out of which shebeens emerged in post-war Manchester, it is useful to consider the origins of the term 'shebeen'. Shebeens were originally defined as any unlicensed premise which served alcohol. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word originates in the Anglo-Irish word *síbín*, from *séibe* meaning 'mugful' and can be traced back to the eighteenth century when it referred to an establishment where alcohol was sold without a license.<sup>2</sup> As the origins of the word suggests, shebeens were not a purely West Indian phenomenon, but were to be found in Scotland and Ireland from at least the eighteenth century, from where they may well have travelled to the West Indies. The word was associated with Scottish and Irish immigrant communities in England in the nineteenth century. In more recent times, shebeens have been associated with townships in South Africa, where they developed as a response to the segregation which

denied places of entertainment to the country's non-white residents and, as is the case here, were also associated with music and dancing.

From the mid-to-late twentieth century, shebeens were particularly associated with a West Indian tradition of 'exuberant' all-night parties, which immigrants brought with them from the Caribbean.<sup>3</sup> These unlicensed clubs or parties, usually held in rooms or cellars of houses, seem to have first emerged in Manchester in the late-1940s, when they were also known as 'blues'. The development of these unlicensed activities paralleled that of a network of licensed clubs run and or owned by African and Caribbean entrepreneurs in the early 1950s which developed along Oxford Road, Denmark Road and extended into the Moss Side area, along Moss Lane and Princess Road. These continued to thrive until the 1990s, when a large number of both 'illicit' and legal entertainment establishments were closed down by the local police and city council.

## Black settlement in Manchester

Manchester and Salford have been home to a black population since the mid-nineteenth century, when mainly African seamen settled in and around the Ordsall and Greengate areas, near the Salford docks, leading the area to become known locally as 'Little Africa'.<sup>4</sup> Bill Williams has suggested that a small population of about 250 Africans, West Indians and black Americans inhabited Greengate in the 1920s. By the 1930s, the threat of slum clearance encouraged many of these to move north east to Broughton and Cheetham, as well as to extend into the southern suburbs of Manchester such as Hulme and Moss Side. This pre-war black population was augmented during the Second World War, with the arrival of many West Indian servicemen. (There were two hostels for African and West Indian seaman in Moss Side during the war, on Carlton Street and Demesne Road.<sup>5</sup>) Holmes highlights the difficulties of distinguishing between these black servicemen and black residents in Britain who also served in the British Armed Forces.<sup>6</sup> The wartime population of servicemen was encouraged to leave after the war, but only a third of the 1,000 civilian recruits accepted government repatriation, while a third of the 10,000 Jamaican servicemen based in Britain chose not to accept demobilisation to their country of origin.<sup>7</sup> Many who remained in Manchester after the war settled in Moss Side; a significant number of West Indians who sailed to take up jobs in Britain after the war were ex-servicemen who had formerly been based in Britain.<sup>8</sup>

The wave of passenger migration from the West Indies commonly associated with post-war immigration is seen as starting with the arrival of the S.S. *Windrush* in June 1948, although most Caribbean migrants did not enter Britain until after 1952, after the American implementation of the Walter-McCarran Act (1952) effectively closed the door



‘Yams for all’ at the Community Stores on Moss Lane in 1958.

Manchester Archives and Local Studies

on Caribbean migration into the United States. Figures for the number of these settlers in the 1950s are hard to come by, because they were not counted in any official statistics. Those figures which have been collated are at best an estimation. The *Interim Report on the Condition of Jamaicans in the United Kingdom*, published by the British government in 1954, concluded that Jamaicans tended ‘to be distributed among the largest cities, with London retaining the lion’s share, approximately 15,000’. Of the other cities, some 2,000 Jamaicans were thought to be living in Birmingham (including Coventry, Wolverhampton and Dudley), approximately 1,250 in Liverpool, and about 1,000 in Manchester.<sup>9</sup> In the country as a whole, West Indians arrived at a rate of approximately 1,000 per year between 1950 and 1951, rising to 2,000 in 1952 and 1953, 10,000 in 1954 and 32,850 between 1955 and 1962. By 1961 an estimated 171,000 West Indians were living in Britain.<sup>10</sup>

Accurate figures for the Caribbean and African migrant population living in Manchester during the 1950s and 1960s are similarly hard to come by. Jo Stanley, using Manchester City Planning Department estimations, suggested that only 350 Caribbean people were living in Manchester in 1951, a figure which had grown to 2,502 by 1961.<sup>11</sup> These figures contrast with those provided by Mosley and Ingham, who suggest that by 1951, approximately 2,500 Afro-Caribbeans were living in the Moss Side area.<sup>12</sup>

Moss Side had acquired a reputation for notoriously bad housing by the mid-nineteenth century but by the late-Victorian period its terraced housing had been complemented by larger three-storey houses for a prosperous white, middle-class population. From around 1914, however,

many of these wealthier residents began to move further south of the city, into Withington, Didsbury and into Cheshire. This left their large residences to be sub-divided into private rental accommodation for the West Indians who started to move into the area in the 1930s and 1940s, attracted by the district's proximity to the Manchester docks and Trafford Park industrial estate, which offered the possibility of work as skilled and unskilled labour.<sup>13</sup> By 1954, Moss Side's mixed population of 37,000 was densely packed into the district's Victorian housing. Many larger properties vacated by the middle class now provided high density accommodation, although the streets were mostly characterized by 'drab 2-up, 2-down terraces.'<sup>14</sup> In 1954 Manchester's Chief Medical Officer reported that of all Manchester's thirty eight districts, only Beswick (with a population per acre of 79.80) was more crowded than Moss Side (with 67.13 people per acre).<sup>15</sup>

## The black leisure scene in Manchester

Mosley and Ingham have suggested that African and West Indian clubs began to surface in the Moss Side area from the late 1930s.<sup>16</sup> Several of these were identified with particular ethnic groups, which reflected the prosperity of some Africans who had accumulated sufficient capital to buy local property. The Palm Beach (later the Reno) was founded by a Nigerian, as was the Merchant Navy. The Cotton Club had Ghanaian origins, while the Kroo Club had links to Sierra Leone and Liberia.<sup>17</sup> The daily lives of black people in Manchester were littered with racist remarks and exclusion from various leisure venues, all of which reinforced the social role of both licensed clubs and unlicensed shebeens which were important social centres and meeting places, part of a broader infrastructure already well-established by the late-1940s.

World War Two had an immense impact on Manchester. Various bombing raids destroyed parts of the city, hundreds of children were evacuated to the countryside for safety, while the arrival in the region of United States servicemen, who were stationed in Britain from 1942, has been described by CP Lee as 'the most culturally important event of the decade'.<sup>18</sup> Approximately three million United States military service personnel remained in Britain throughout the Second World War, mainly concentrated in south-west and eastern England and parts of the North West.<sup>19</sup> Of particular significance for this article, is the fact that 135,000 of these were African-American.<sup>20</sup> In north-west England, black American servicemen were stationed at Bamber Bridge, near Preston in Lancashire, and Burtonwood, a couple of miles to the north west of Warrington. Burtonwood airfield opened in 1940 as a storage and servicing centre for RAF aircraft and was transferred to the United States Army Air Force in June 1942, to become a servicing centre for the United States Eighth, Ninth, Twelfth and Fifteenth Air Forces aircraft.

Burtonwood became the largest airfield in Europe during the Second World War, and it is estimated that some 18,000 service personnel were stationed at the site in 1945.<sup>21</sup> Manchester has been described as a magnet for American servicemen stationed there.<sup>22</sup> Dorothy Jasper, a Moss Side resident, recalled how a great many American servicemen who relaxed in Manchester were stationed at Burtonwood: 'It wasn't just black Americans, white [as well].'<sup>23</sup> For many Black American servicemen, the clubs, bars and shebeens which catered for the city's local black community became a favoured place for spending time away from the airbase. The money they spent proved to be a valuable source of income, as did the alcohol and music they also provided. Many contributors to CP Lee's work commented on the influence of the American G.I.s, seeing it as a significant point in the 'Americanisation' of British popular culture.<sup>24</sup> Lee described Burtonwood as an 'autonomous, independent outpost, serviced by its own P.X., schools, cinemas, and Radio Stations [which] staged massive dances in aircraft hangars, [with] swing and Jump bands', a means by which many local residents and musicians in the North West became exposed to American culture.<sup>25</sup> (The PX, or Post Exchange, was a military retail store which sold provisions and equipment.)

How African-American service personnel spent their leisure time in the region was shaped by the discriminatory policies of US military regulation expectations which also had repercussion for local black populations.<sup>26</sup> In some cases, local people actively opposed attempts by officials from the US armed forces to impose segregation upon leisure activities which involved their servicemen.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, whether officially or unofficially, many facilities and leisure spaces in Manchester became segregated or separated, as a result of pressure from white Americans.<sup>28</sup> Dorothy Jasper recalled how 'all the black Americans' loved to go to the Cotton Club, maybe because it was 'hidden' away on Oxford Road and they could party 'until 8 o'clock in the morning.'<sup>29</sup> By the end of the 1950s, an entertainment infrastructure had developed in and around the Moss Side, Oxford Road and Manchester University area which was undoubtedly shaped by the dual effects of the economic influence of black American GI's and US racial segregation:

The top of Oxford Road, not the bottom, because that was for the white yanks at the bottom. From All Saints down, all that belonged to the white Yanks. From All Saints upwards belonged to black Yanks and black people.<sup>30</sup>

This 'colour bar' not only had an impact on the American servicemen but also had a knock-on effect for the local population, as many of Manchester's pubs, clubs and hotels refused to let black people enter their premises or serve them food or drink.<sup>31</sup> The minutes of the council's General Annual Licensing Meeting (Brewster Session) in June 1954, for example, reveal that some pubs and hotels, in this case the Whitworth

Hotel in Moss Side and the Paragon Inn on Oxford Road in Manchester, had been refusing to serve alcohol to black residents.<sup>32</sup>

## Memories of Shebeens

By the mid-1950s shebeens had begun to appear across the country in urban centres like London and Manchester with significant Jamaican populations. What seems to have contributed to their appearance was the ease with which they could be hosted; a room and the required musical equipment were all that were needed to host a 'blues' or 'house party':

If you have a Blue Spot [a type of radiogram] and some tunes you could push back the furniture and have your own little function every Saturday night. That's where the shebeens come from.<sup>33</sup>

Moss Side became the centre for the shebeens which proliferated in Manchester from the mid-1950s and into the early 1960s, although the illicit and casual nature of these arrangements makes it difficult to provide a fully accurate picture of their number. Some were hosted in former commercial buildings such as old hotels or dance halls; some sprang up in the front rooms and cellars of people's homes; others were located in disused houses. A front room in Meadow Street, for example, was the location of one Moss Side shebeen in the late 1950s.<sup>34</sup> A particularly infamous and much-mentioned location was Monton House, a former hotel on the corner of Lloyd Street and Monton Street, which was home to both a gambling house and a shebeen. As Dorothy Skinner recalled:

It was gambling upstairs and downstairs. When I say gambling upstairs I meant you had to go upstairs when you went in the front door to gamble, but downstairs – and women were not allowed there. And downstairs in the cellar was the shebeen.<sup>35</sup>

Kenneth Williams, a singer on the Manchester scene in the 1950s, also had fond memories of the place: 'The Monton House, that was our favourite haunt the Monton House, play cards, dice, shebeen – oh all sort.' Monton House continued to be a popular place through the sixties and seventies: 'Anybody that was working down Deansgate where you know clubs were and that, they came to the Reno afterwards, they always did and then they ended up in Monton House.'<sup>36</sup> Several streets in the Moss Side area developed a reputation for housing shebeens within a short walking distance. By the early 1960s, when Sidney Lewis arrived in Moss Side from Jamaica, Cartmel Road had become the location for a number of 'house parties', as had Harpenden Street which housed so many that it became known locally as 'Beat Street'.<sup>37</sup>

so many beat was on there, you don't have to ax where the party is, if you go



on Harpenden Street there was party der, so you call it beat street. It use to run across and come out to Moss Lane East and there was a scrap yard at the end of it der, some Irish scrap yard and there was a bookie across der.<sup>38</sup>

Many of the shebeens on 'Beat Street' and in other parts of Moss Side were known for their all night opening, and some patrons could find themselves partying for the entire weekend. Sydney Lewis recalled:

I leave the house on a Saturday evening and I went to the gambling cellar and I lose my money, I remember that and I was in a bad mood anyhow I drive to Harpenden Street that was where we use to call Beat Street and I go to a few party and I leave from there and I go to a few more and I finish up at Cecil Street you know where the park is where the Academy is ... It was off Denmark Road anyhow, I finish up there and I leave from there and I don't know where I went too. I lost all track, I got home Sunday morning after 8 o'clock stuff like that because [shebeen] use to carry until 7 o'clock you know half past sevens on a Sunday morning, not all of dem but some of dem.<sup>39</sup>

It is clear that many shebeens not only charged an entry fee, but also sold alcohol to be consumed on or off the premises. 'You know these Blues in the front room and you could only get a certain amount in and they would sell drinks.'<sup>40</sup> Alcohol was always available at the venue and it was customary to buy your crate and take your place or 'hold down' your regular corner.

You bu[y] it from them, they use to sell it. If there is eight of you, you all put two and six together and five bob and that's it, you XX corner, so when your friend walks in you know where you are because say this is a regular beat place you know this corner is your corner you see. Every time he comes down there he doesn't have to look anywhere for you, he know [you is] in this corner or that corner, everybody had their own corner you see. It was the in ting, so you have all your drinks there.<sup>41</sup>

The perception of the shebeens as centres of criminality and vice were apparent even in the early 1950s, and the Caribbean community itself was aware of this perception;

They were what were always called illegal drinking dens, and the press would make out that all sorts went on in them, but they were just ordinary working people's houses or their basement – sometimes it would be in an empty building. And it was only illegal because the guy hosting the gathering have no licence to sell the drink.<sup>42</sup>

Police attitudes towards these illegal establishment were ambivalent. Some local residents recalled relations with the police as quite cordial and reasonable.

Well the police as I said we never had any problem with the police ... in those days if somebody said there was noise at a party da police come politely, we turn it down a bit they would have a drink some of them might and they go, they have something to eat and they go.<sup>43</sup>



Sydney thought these casual exchanges were based on an understanding that no 'fighting nor any cutting up, nor any guns and tings like that' were going to occur in the clubs and shebeens. Relationships between the police, shebeen owners and shebeen patrons emerge as ambiguous and collusive in many interviews. Kenneth Williams recalled of Monton Street, for example, how:

The police use to come in there and they use to come in there and whoever owned the place, the clubs and all that, the police would come in and they would get free drinks and I don't know probably got a few bob as well. But we knew, all the people, all the informers in Moss Side in them days, the black informers, and they would inform on one another, and inform on one another's clubs and we all knew. Everybody knew who was the informers because they used to come to them specially.<sup>44</sup>

Other shebeen regulars depicted the shadowy ways in which clubs were policed in the 1950s and 1960s, an issue which would clearly benefit from archival research and police oral testimonies.

Ah, the police were in it as much as we were. The police were paid, there were a lot of back handers going on and we all knew it, but they used to come into The Reno when it was shutting for drinks. There was a lock in, so they could stay open if the police were there because it was a lock in and detectives used to come. I am not talking about police in uniforms, I am talking about detectives, used to come. They frequented the Mayfair, the Cotton Club and the Reno but the Reno wasn't open at the time of The Mayfair. Mayfair was first, but at that time police were always paid.<sup>45</sup>

Although shebeens provided members of the Jamaican community with a familiar cultural form to which they could turn with relative ease, there is no simple explanation as to why they became so widespread during this period. Some West Indians were certainly unhappy with the limitations and restrictions placed on them by British society and wanted to take part in leisure experiences which reminded them of home, allowed them to play loud music, drink freely and stay out as late as they pleased. Some have argued that the traditional phenomenon of the shebeen or house party took on a greater importance among Caribbean migrants who settled in Britain. The deejay Jah Vego, who used to deejay at dances in London during the 1960s, suggests that Jamaicans were more receptive to 'Jamaican-style' dances when they were in England, because the dance had changed from being an everyday, mundane form to become a reminder of home.<sup>46</sup> The type of entertainment culture which Jamaicans were used to, contrasted sharply with the leisure activities that they assumed that British people preferred. Lee, for example, suggests that shebeens were the West Indian and African migrants' response to 'archaic English licensing laws'.<sup>47</sup> The quiet reserve associated with British pub culture was seen as inhibiting and lacking the freedom of expression which many young migrants desired, as Soul Persian indicated. Persian,

born in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1943, arrived in Manchester in the early 1960s, when he was eighteen, and blues and shebeens quickly came to play an important part in his new social life, as he and his friends set up their own shebeen in the cellar of the Denmark Café, on Denmark Street in Moss Side.<sup>48</sup> These small beginnings proved to be Persian's stepping-stone to licensed club life, as he was soon invited to become DJ of the Reno Club, in Moss Side. Persian suggests how 'alien' the restricted and reserved character of British leisure culture seemed to him and other West Indians:

[W]e didn't understand pubs, going sitting in pubs, just sitting there staring at the walls and drinking till 10.30 and then go home. You know, when people work a long week, come the weekend they need to let their hair down, and the British way didn't suit us.<sup>49</sup>

Other interviewees focussed on the shebeens' role in providing a respite from the harsh realities and difficulties of living in England.

The life here was hard. *Hard*. Everything was so different, from the climate to how people talk to you if you go in a shop. So come the weekend you have to relax, completely, among your own crowd and be able to carry on like you did back home. Not that there was much choice for us, because so many places in London wouldn't let black men in. So we have to do our own thing, keeping dances in houses, in basements, in the shebeens, or in school dinner halls.<sup>50</sup>

For Arthur Culpeper, who came to Manchester in 1954, the shebeen scene was a place to catch up with people 'like you', a welcome respite from the challenges and the threats of violence which many migrants faced.

You go to a club in Moss Side. You sit on a table and your friends will be there who you saw the week before and it's really something else ... Everybody seems to be one great family. You drink ... you dance with your partners and you had no fear of a bottle coming across your head and anything like that.<sup>51</sup>

Despite the popularity of licensed clubs in Manchester, such as the Reno, Nile and the Cotton Club, some felt that they did not cater for everyone, and much preferred the atmosphere of the house party:

The Nile and the Capital were the two main [clubs], because they weren't clubs as such that young people could go too. Even the grown-ups never used to go to these clubs because what they use to have is house parties. On a Saturday everywhere you go there is a house party, a blues as well call it, you know. Just normal people keeping blues.<sup>52</sup>



## Music of the shebeens

Shebeens were a product of the 1940s and 1950s, when one of their main functions was to give people the opportunity to ‘dance all-night’.<sup>53</sup> Much of the music they played, as well as alcohol and other merchandise, originated with American servicemen from Burtonwood and Bamber Bridge. Servicemen from Burtonwood, which remained the largest military airbase of its kind in Europe, regularly spent their leave in Manchester and Liverpool, where they mixed and exchanged records and musical influences. When largely white youth culture was developing around Manchester’s coffee bars and juke boxes in the 1950s, local shebeens became what Lee has described as the ‘main influence’ on jazz musicians in Manchester.<sup>54</sup> Tosh Ryan, saxophonist in the Victor Brox Blues Train Band, described how the base at Burtonwood became a conduit for live and recorded music in the North West, as American G.I.s brought albums with them from the United States and became part of the local live music scene;

[Burtonwood] ... was a massive camp – that changed dance hall music quite radically I think because you got Americans bringing albums over, you got Americans who were playing in bands at weekends, that includes dance band music, moving from dance bands to Jazz, small groups. From Jazz things developed through the late 1950s into the early 1960s,<sup>55</sup>

The Reno (downstairs) and the Nile (upstairs) on Princess Street, about 1969. These were key venues in the development of the city’s black culture.

Local musicians in Liverpool were similarly grateful for the 'regular exchanges of records' between themselves and servicemen who were stationed in the region. Eddie and Chris Amoo, for example, recalled how inspirational the 'music, dance fashions and record collections' of visiting black American servicemen were in the Liverpool club scene between the 1940s and 1960s.<sup>56</sup>

American servicemen were not, however, the only source of recorded music from the United States. The black community's historical links to the docks and Manchester Ship-Canal provided another channel for black American and Caribbean music during the 1950s and 1960s.

Nat King Cole was coming out then and these black singers from America. They had all this music that we didn't. You wouldn't have heard it on the radio, it was all English singers. You only heard this because the men on the boats used to bring these records from America. They brought all that music with them.<sup>57</sup>

The music of the big band jazz era prevailed from the late 1940s into the early 1950s, changing to the sounds of 'jumping blues' and the 'crooning' black singers in the mid- to late-1950s. In the first half of the 1950s, rhythm & blues, or what was formerly known as 'race music', popular with black urban Americans, was taken up by many in Jamaica, where the development of open-air dances, playing the 'hottest R&B and hot jazz' sowed the seeds for the sound-system culture which was, in turn, passed on to the clubs and shebeens of Manchester.<sup>58</sup> The Eric Deane Orchestra, which played at the Nile nightclub in the 1940s and 50s, comprised West Indians and Africans, including renowned musicians such as Fela Kuti (fourth trumpet) and Lord Kitchener (string bass).<sup>59</sup>

The West Indians who moved and settled in Britain from the mid-1950s, brought with them not only traditions of the dance and the sound system, but a love for American R&B and Jazz. Bradley's *Bass Culture* provides a flavour of the music which was transported from America via the Caribbean, describing how the sounds of 'prolific' artists like Louis Jordan were 'perennial favourite[s]'. Wynonie Harris's US hit 'Blood Shot Eyes' 'was virtually stuck to the Jamaican sound men's turntable between 1951 and 1953'. Artists such as Bill 'Mr Honky Tonk' Doggett, Professor Longhair and Jimmy Reed would 'regularly rock crowds'. Jazz was represented by Dizzy Gillespie, Sarah Vaughan and Earl Hines. The 'roots of rock 'n' roll were present in the music of Fats Domino and Lloyd Price while the honey-dripping likes of Nat King Cole, Billy Eckstine, Jesse Belvin or the Moonglows were the luvve gods of their time.'<sup>60</sup>

By the late 1950s, American artists were not the only musicians to be influencing young visitors to the clubs and shebeens of Moss Side. The West Indians also imported new musical genres, which were partly influenced by the black American music of the era and partly by their own cultural musical roots. After the end of the Second World War more

and more young people in Jamaica and other parts of the West Indies began purchasing radios and, as a result, were increasingly exposed to the rhythm and blues of American artists such as Wynonie Harris, Louis Jordan and Fats Domino. As the popularity of this music grew on the islands during the early 1950s, some local artists attempted to recreate its sounds and pulsating rhythms, playing them at the open dances which were also very popular. This music intermingled with the styles and sounds of the islands' indigenous musical genre, Mento, as well as Calypso, the carnival music of the islands of Trinidad and Tobago, to give rise to a distinctly new form, Ska. Ska was produced by studio owners such as Prince Buster (whose first record 'Carolina', in 1961, became a timeless classic), Duke Reid, owner of the now legendary 'Trojan Sound system, and Clement 'Coxsone' Dodd, owner of 'Studio One' studios. This was also the period when the sound system emerged as an important part of Jamaican musical history, as DJs competed fiercely with each other to provide the largest and loudest systems. As Ska began to replace R & B as the 'number one sound' during the late 1950s and early 1960s, it was brought to Britain by many Jamaican immigrants, when its spread was greatly helped by the 'Barcelona' Blue Spot (Blaupunkt) radiogram, noted earlier. For the Blue Spot was not only a combined radio and record player, with a drinks cabinet for entertaining, but it could receive signals direct from Jamaican radio stations, bringing both music and news direct from 'home' on its built-in radio receiver. It is from this music system that many people claim the term 'Blues', another term for shebeens or parties, originates.

The music played in the shebeens and clubs gave Caribbean migrants the opportunity to listen to the music they most liked and which they felt was not being played, either on the BBC or commercial radio stations, because as Dorothy Jasper recalled, 'on the radio all you heard was English music at that time which was very boring you know. There was no jazz.'<sup>61</sup> Kenneth Williams's 'favourites were black "crooners" like Nat King Cole, Billy Eckstine Sammy Davies and Ray Charles'.<sup>62</sup> Jasper described the music played at the Reno as 'more or less all Calypso and Nat King Cole', although the music played at venues such as the Nile, Reno and Monton Street was also 'a bit of a mixture'.<sup>63</sup> Interestingly, Tab Hunter, a white singer and teen heartthrob, whose ballad 'Red Sails in the Sunset' was released in 1957, was popular by the mid- to late 1950s, as was Shirley Bassey:

[She] was just coming to focus – she started to get well known, Shirley, with her very first new numbers what she had. I can't remember what it was called but Shirley was singing. You [also] got Lou Armstrong records.<sup>64</sup>

By the late 1950s several newly established record shops in Manchester were providing those fortunate enough to own record players such as a Dansette or a Bluespot the opportunity to purchase the 78s and 45s,

which were beginning to be imported from the United States. Places such as 'Penny's Record Corner' on Princess Street, and 'Paul Marsh Records', at 24 Alexandra Road, which stocked the latest R & B, jazz and various other types of music, were soon joined by record shops in the city centre, which included Barry's Record Rendezvous on Blackfriars Street and Robinsons Records, also on Blackfriars, whose owner, Arthur Robinson, used to visit the United States to import 45s.<sup>65</sup>

## Conclusion

Initially, the opening, and development, of clubs and shebeens catering to a black clientele was driven by the racial discrimination which many African and Caribbean migrants experienced in and around Manchester in all aspects of their daily lives. Leisure and entertainment were important areas in which such prejudice manifested itself, as black people found themselves barred from or refused service in pubs and clubs around the city. Their response was to open and run their own pubs, clubs and shebeens, which gave them the freedom to listen to the sort of music unavailable in the city's mainstream clubs or on mainstream radio stations. Much of the prejudice and discrimination which the black community faced could be traced back to the pre-World War One period, but there is plenty of evidence to suggest that by the early 1940s this was also being driven by the stationing of United States servicemen at bases like Bamber Bridge and Burtonwood. The United States military was a segregated institution, and segregation was practiced on and off base in Britain, mostly at the insistence of high ranking US military officials. The imposition of segregation undoubtedly consolidated a 'colour bar' in Manchester's pubs, bars and hotels, effectively creating separate cultural spaces divided along racial lines. As a consequence, money from relatively well-paid black-American servicemen helped sustain a network of shebeens and licensed clubs from the mid to late 1940s, whose appeal for those on leave included their extended opening hours. The impact that American servicemen had on Manchester leisure culture both during and after the war role is a potentially rich area for further research.

Shebeens in Moss Side developed alongside the infrastructure of 'licensed' clubs, welfare centres and cafes which emerged between the late 1940s and the late 1960s to the south of Manchester city centre, down Oxford Road, along Denmark Road, and around Moss Lane and Princess Road. Many of these 'blues' were hosted in the homes of Caribbean migrants, especially from Jamaica, whose numbers grew with the closure of Caribbean migration to the United States. American GI's, and black workers on the transatlantic shipping routes to North America were important channels for the music, clothes and alcohol which became culturally desirable in the 1950s and 1960s, as levels of disposable income rose and youth culture expanded. Of particular cultural value were the



jazz, blues and R&B records then being released in the United States by artists like Nat King Cole, Louis Jordan and Fats Domino.

The early rhythm and blues played in venues like the Nile and the Capital and in many shebeens brought musicians together from both sides of the Atlantic and across racial barriers.<sup>66</sup> White teens, some of whom had begun to recognize that the 'white' dance music to which they were exposed had rather different roots, started to seek out the black artists who had inspired the sanitized swing of white band leaders such as Benny Goodman and Glen Miller, and in the process came into contact with West Indian musical traditions.<sup>67</sup> Lee argues that it was this desire to understand 'beyond the mainstream', mixed with the influences of 'USAAF personnel, African and West Indian immigration', which gave a particular 'richness' of talent to the Manchester jazz scene. As Victor Brox, a local white blues musician in the 1950s observed:

At the time they were actually increasing the size of the school [William Hulme Grammar School] and we had a lot of Jamaican and Trinidadian people ... and some of these guys were great musicians and they came in and joined the band. You'd have like a West Indian bass player, and a West Indian guitarist, so the music, although it was ostensibly a traditional jazz band, its parabola was very, very, very wide.<sup>68</sup>

Lee has argued that during the 1950s, coffee bar and youth club culture combined with the influences of the Moss Side music scene to give birth to the 'beat boom' which became massively popular from the mid to late 1960s, not only in the North West but throughout Britain and in the United States. Although it is impossible, without further evidence, to quantify the impact which shebeens made in this melding of racial, social and musical influences, it seems inevitable that they had some impact, as Dave Haslam has suggested, in describing Moss Side's importance as a focal point and melting pot for less mainstream forms of music.<sup>69</sup>

Moss Side ... provides graphic evidence of the centrality of music in Mancunian lives, and also the key part played by black music in shaping popular culture, from jazz, blues and soul: the Moss Side jazz clubs of the 1950s ... brought fresh rhythms to the dance floor, featuring far rawer sounds than the mainstream jazz dominating the rest of the Manchester circuit; the sound system, moveable feasts of bluebeat and blues, ... sustained the roots of the black community in the 1960s.<sup>70</sup>

This short survey of shebeens has only touched the surface of their role and significance. It is, however, a reminder of how much research remains to be done on the origins and development of these local music cultures, and on their role in reinforcing a sense of community against a frequently hostile society. What has been highlighted here is intended as a small contribution to a wider project of exploration, as local groups and individuals embark on the task of unearthing the complex hidden histories of black music and the Manchester music scene.